

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (currently amended) A tunnel designator~~system~~ to couple tunnel servers to tunnel clients executing host applications for use in a virtual private network (VPN) environment, said tunnel designator not being one of said tunnel servers and comprising:

- (a) a receiver that receives requests from host applications executing on the tunnel clients, the requests addressed to at least one of the tunnel servers~~the tunnel coupling system~~ to establish a VPN tunnel;
- (b) a processor that processes the requests, the processor also maintaining ~~and~~ an indication of loads on the tunnel servers, the processor operative to establish the VPN tunnels by designating at least one of the tunnel servers to each of the requested~~sed~~ tunnel; and
- (c) a tunnel traffic distributor that distributes tunnel traffic to the tunnel servers based at least part on the designations.

2. (currently amended) ~~The system~~ tunnel designator of claim 1, ~~and further comprising:~~

- (a) an evaluation processor that evaluates the tunnel traffic before the tunnel traffic distributor distributes the tunnel traffic to the tunnel servers.

3. (currently amended) ~~The system~~ tunnel designator of claim 2, wherein the evaluation performed by the evaluation processor includes at least performing security functions on the tunnel traffic.

4. (currently amended) The tunnel designator ~~system~~ of claim 1, wherein:

- (a) the ~~request~~ processor establishes the VPN tunnel by, in part, associating each VPN tunnel with characteristics of tunnel traffic for that VPN tunnel; and

- (b) the tunnel traffic distributor operates in part based on the associations, without involvement of the host applications.

5. (new) A method of connecting a plurality of tunnel clients to a plurality of tunnel servers using a tunnel designator, the method comprising:

using said tunnel designator to receive a request from one of said tunnel clients;

determining if said request is a valid request from one of said tunnel clients;

determining if said request is for a new tunnel, and

if so:

- (a) opening a new tunnel to a selected one of said tunnel servers; and

- (b) modifying an address map to include information associating said selected one of said tunnel servers to said request;

if not:

- (b) using said address map to route said request to a mapped tunnel server.